

**Blowing Holes
Through The Everyday**

by

Sheila Dalton



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HMS Press:

**Electronic Books In Print / Books On Disk BOD
ADP & Canadian Poetry Association
London Ontario Chapter**

literarynewscpa@yahoo.ca

ISBN 1-895700-17-5

Blowing Holes Through The Everyday

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by Sheila Dalton

CANADIAN CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Dalton, Sheila.

Blowing holes through the everyday

Poems.

ISBN 1-895700-01-9 (Pbk.)

I. Title.

PS8557.A58B5 1993 C811'.54 C93-094919-6
PR9199.3.D35B5 1993

To S.O. Izenberg, with thanks.

Some of the poems in this collection have been published in:

A labor of Love. Polestar Press. Mona Fertig, ed.

next exit

Poetry Canada Review

Poetry Toronto

event

Canadian Woman Studies

Canadian Forum

Cross-Canada Writers' Quarterly

Room of One's Own

INTRODUCTION

I write to communicate. I want these poems to reach you on whatever level you are ready to receive them. If some of my phrases stand out in your mind, perhaps echo inside it after you have put the book down, if the themes seem relevant to your own life, if you see yourself or someone you know in my work, if you are moved at times, I will be immensely gratified. For this is what I crave -connection with an audience - and this is what Wayne Ray, the publisher of HMS Press, has given me a chance of finding.

When he accepted this book for publication, Mr. Ray asked me to address the issue of why I write, and in considering the question, I came up with many answers. Searching for the right word - like looking for the lost chord! - is fascinating - and actually finding it occasionally is really exciting. I believe in the value of words, while being acutely aware of their limitations - how hard it is for all of us to say what we mean, how often we misunderstand each other even while trying our hardest to listen and/or be heard. And it became clear to me that while I write for personal reasons- pleasure in words; the chance to confront despair and disillusion; the opportunity to wrestle with the tragedy and the mystery of life; the joy of working in an atmosphere free of ambition, deceit or need; an attempt to affirm my self in an anonymous world, etc., etc. - I write mainly in the hope of reaching other people. I want you to feel, as I do, that some things are expressible only in poetry, that to try to articulate them any other way is akin to analysing God (if you happen to believe in him). In other words, if everything could be pinned down and diagnosed, life would have no mystery, and poetry would not be necessary. But life does have mystery. We cannot know everything, though we would like to, and in accepting the unknowable my poetry has both its origin and its rationale.

Poetry is necessary. It is vital to us, if only we knew it. If nothing else, it confirms that something is missing from our daily lives, something real, something worth striving towards. It insists we confront the kind of realities that salaries and careers are engineered to keep at bay. But already the general population has lost its poetic voice, and I am also often afraid that I will stop writing, in this society which is so hard on artists. If we - poets and readers both - abandon poetry, we forfeit one of our last links to whatever magical qualities we, as a species, possess. What I am referring to is not "rational", in the worst sense that word is used. I am convinced that we are losing a spiritual dimension, a quality of mind which cannot survive the cold light of scrutiny -an instinctual knowing, if you will, which can experience the Truth because it does not know what truth is.

And that is why I strive to write words and phrases that will hit you on a non-intellectual level that will move and excite you, and reach the deepest, most hidden part of your self - even as I write about intellectually-accessible ideas, as clearly and directly as I can. It is the "Ah-hah!" I'm after - a moment of revelation powerful enough to connect us, to fuse our lonely separateness into a glowing whole. An orgasm of the mind, if you will. I want this for both of us, just as I want tyrants to suddenly hate war.

Blowing Holes Through The Everyday

Sheila Dalton, HMS Press, London. 1993

Review by Deborah Jurdjevic Canadian Woman Studies

Sheila Dalton's first book of poems, *Blowing Holes Through The Everyday*, reads as a dialogue between a pragmatist and a dreamer. The poet inclines towards first the one, then the other, moving steadily toward the penultimate poem *Whales on the Saguenay River*, from which the title phrase is taken. This is one of the better poems in the volume and one which melds the two voices.

The strong opening line, the iambic tetrameter, promises epic storytelling, a hero, a plot along the lines of *The Ancient Mariner*: The wind was strong, the waves were high. But this is a late twentieth-century poem written by a woman with other concerns on her mind. She abandons both the promise of rhyme and an established rhythm for free verse more appropriate to the autobiographical and the confessional. She sees the whales as a distant flash of truth, hears them *puffing air against / the silence / blowing holes through the everyday*, and her concern is for the future of the small son she holds in her arms. The poem's moral, that the world is a marvel for those committed to seeing, is defined by the whales who appear without warning and in the final line, remembering the epic form of opening, slide *onwards to sea*.

Tests, the poem immediately preceding *Whales* is also confessional in tone, immediate, and written for the sake of the moral which appears conveniently at the end. Unlike *Whales*, however, this is a pragmatic poem. Its governing metaphor is a diagnostic test made to determine the source of a persistent back pain. The physical exam tropes the set of circumstances testing the author's willingness and ability to endure pain and frustration in order finally to write. Dalton concludes: *But not to try / means yet another woman / silenced*. One takes the point, but wishes at the same time for less explanation and for a greater trust in the reader.

One of the riskier and, to my mind, one of the more successful poems is *Friends / Conversation* in which Dalton does trust the metaphor to tell the tale. The subject of the poem is infidelity between husband and wife, between woman friend and woman friend. Nowhere is there anything approaching direct statement. Dalton forgoes rhythm and rhyme for prose; the poetry lies in the power of her images. Her setting is the natural world, a possible Elysium, in the form of a picnic, but what we get, through metaphor entirely, is a sense of that first world shattered.

The poem proceeds in a series of verse paragraphs, each representing a composition, a still-life, and each suggesting through what is depicted a more important absence. The opening paragraph for example, *next to the wine glasses shoved at angles into the grass, ants scramble into giant wheels, fan out in a plateful of legs*, is typical of the whole. The wine glasses are askew either because the terrain threatens their upright stability or because the wine has been drunk and the glasses abandoned. This is the first of a dozen delicate details that suggest that something is false in the poem's prosaic Eden. Ants, unwanted always, invade the scene, and are not prevented, perhaps not even noticed except by the poet whose image of a *plateful of legs* gives us both the sense of distance from the ongoing action and a sense of the whole accessible only in fragments.

The central image of dismemberment, with probable sexual overtones, points to the flaw in a supposedly functional human community. The poet tells us that there is something wrong in

each of the subsequent scenes, and in the third paragraph alludes to a friend who is pregnant by another woman's husband. Against this betrayal in the center of the poem, conversation, ceremony, and laughter weave a web of community which seems to hold the participants of this drama. The tension between the conventional and its breach is assessed in the final lines. Conversation and its promise of friendship and belonging float free in time and space; the human actors turn to stone. The poem makes its own commentary on the soap-opera quality of the drama, and demands attentive reading.

In the preface to *Blowing Holes Through The Everyday*, Dalton, like Leavis at the beginning of this Century and Wordsworth at the beginning of the last, worries that a spiritual dimension is endangered in our commercial world. Her book is her response to that widely shared worry, and reflects her confidence that the particulars of daily life will show us, as they did the Romantics, if we will only look, *the world in a grain of sand*.

FOR ADAM

The light came in pieces
I played my recorder in pieces

I sang in verses separate, staccato
and complete

I sang in steel

The steel rails of the bed
the steel of the monitors
the IV's were steel
steel notes

I played them as you were born

And then I rose from steel
pronged and humming to the tunes I sang

I rose away from steel

And then down
into the earth we burrowed
(were you frightened? did you help?)
I was wild with triumph.
Had they thought to chain us with their steel?
We were of the earth, and free.

I was loud!
I pushed because I had to
it was inevitable
the world wanted it (and you).
I had no choice
and yet I chose
to open
out till the singing world became an O
out till my body could no longer contain me
open, unlocked, manifest
I gave your birth to you.

THE ANALYST AFTER HOURS

Some thoughts bring me no joy.

The sad, small deaths
I live with every day
predict my own.

So many lives, quick with breath and pain,
the words and body speaking
a whole language, where are they now?
- shelved in a dulled cacophony
of notes and tapes,
long forgotten except
to remind me of mortality.

I have been seared in my patients'
focussed gaze,
and carried in obsession's sling -
their child, or twisted twin,
an ugly growing part of their own flesh
or a shining treasure
they can hold close to themselves at last
without burning the skin off their fingers
without tearing a hole in their hearts.

I know the price they pay
to approach me.
They shovel out their entrails
for my divination.
They feel through me all the buried
turmoil of their lives.
To see me in their dreams
brings them scant pleasure
for I have invaded the Under-realms
the source of longing and the end of hope.
They can never touch me.
It is simply not allowed.
They know I'd crumble if they did
the Wizard of Oz, M.D., D.O.A.
I know
it's God they're really after,
that old trickster in the beard
and, in this hall of mirrors,
I only look like him.

Sometimes, they see their only hope
in Death.
Is he the hero?
He says he is, the old liar.
And they listen to his Siren's song,
the more beautiful
because it should be true.

But there are other times.
As despair gives up its grip.
Flesh laid bare by sorrow
grows a thicker skin,
and a broken life becomes
a working whole.

Then their gaze enfolds me
buoys me up
holds me in a cradle
of pure pleasure
to heal the days of pain.

Still, I am afraid.
One day I will look
into the mirror
and see a hungry crowd.
They will wave their arms at me
and call out my name
They will love me
as they tear right through me,
mistaking me for a cloud,

For my paradox is this:
As they most become themselves,
I turn transparent and when I disappear
in a sudden blaze of knowledge,
I am most fully real.

BIRTH SONG

We were young when the light came
the light which clothed us
Young in the way the earth was once

We ran with the horses, then,
We flew with the birds
There was no question
Of lips or sighs
There were no songs or words
We simply sought each other out,
And knew.

The light, the light
It is the light I remember best
The whole world skittering, ablaze.
Was the sun young then?
Trees were, and grass.
Why not the sun?

When, as now,
Every dream becomes an echo
And the sun an ageing demigod,
Not God
When the light is in our eyes
When it dances, heedless of us,
Through our lives
And we yearn to go with it
And cannot
That is when we remember
our true births.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHILDREN

Oh, so other now that you are here.
Not mine until no longer mine.

Be near.
Like pinpoints of mercury
on a sloping glass slide
our childhoods
merge and grow,
eager to release themselves
to the power of not-alone.

Let me alone! Let me read,
let me think in peace.
Stop yattering with all the force
of your inviolable needs.
Their authority makes me crazy.

Between us, indifference is a bad joke.

There is high drama in every trip to Loblaw's,
in every battle over exactly how many Smarties
constitute a treat.
How could I ever have been bored
with the monotony of detail which
creates life, destroys it, gives it form and shape?

I will always know I made you,
that my body built you up
from nothing --
the source of life itself.

In the trance of your becoming
I was as witches are,
as goddesses,
crazy, crazy with the power.
(Though all the while I slept,
under the spell of life.)

Oh child, oh child.
The significance of children.
The world will tell you one thing
and I, quite another.

You composite creature,
my life and my death.
To you, I will be neither.
It is your life we are talking about.
It has nothing to do with me.

I, too, have refused to recognize
the power of life
in any but its most
gratifying manifestations.

Child, I will love you
through all my ambivalences.
I am as much your history
as you are my destiny, my fate -
those things I saw as solace
for the poor in spirit, until
I was made rich
in you.

COCK-TEASERS

Dance away, dance away.
Young girls with white bodies
dance just out of reach

Cock-teasers, self-pleasers.
What other power did we have
than to dance away into the moonlight
taking our moon-kindled bodies with us
taking our unsung wonders
and our unskilled hands
just out of reach
of our pursuers?

Fulfillment was a joke
there was none in the breaking of hymens
In the filling up with cream
came the cat's demise
a lonely, sick aftertaste
in the bed's cold morning
and a washing of clothes
in the foam of dead secrets.

Dance away, dance away
just out of reach
the hands following,
the eyes with their hooks
trailing in the river of desire.

Though they wrote us off
in books
and laughed about us
in locker rooms
and raised the girls
who really liked to fuck
and had no needs beyond it
to heights previously reserved
for saints and angels
we knew the dance itself
was our best hope
to keep our faith alive
that we were wanted for something more
than our libidos.

CONFESSION

It is dark in
the confessional.

Coffin-dark.

And there is a
large man she
cannot see
behind a grill,
whispering

while her heart
beats loud enough
to hurt.

She searches
desperately
for sins.
A gift
for this faceless
father
and all he
stands for.

He
tells her to
describe her
fantasies.

She is only ten.
She has been dreaming
of naked women
dancing in a ring.

There is no more.

But in insistant
darkness
she tells him more.

She is dreamy and afraid
and his longing
fills her mouth.

Forgiveness
may never
come.

DREAMING OF DRAGONS

When I dream of dragons, the beating of their
wings alone tears mastery from the air
flings it up in sudden spirals
and captures it again,
a votive offering to mouths
of fire and gold.

Their talons pierce the truth of myth
and make it bleed.
Like true believers, they wage battle -
liege lords of honest conquerors.

Every night, they come in a
darkness I think I understand
so that sometimes I am a dragon
dreaming of night,
lashing the bedspread with a tail
of knotted muscle, scaled.
The ace-of-spade shields
along my back bristle,
a fence gone mad,
rattled to the edge of reason
by the sticks of boys, running.

If you ride on a dragon, right up near the neck,
and hold very gently onto the soft skin there,
it will not hurt you.

EYES

The breast a chalice of flesh
(who soothed it when the nipples cracked
and a child as beautiful as you with a
mouth like a lamphrey's piston latched on,
clamped down, drew in your blood and milk
as hungrily as you held your baby to you?)

Around you, the market of Mexico sells
food and dreams.
The stink of both is high
while the eyes of a tourist, another hungry
traveller, eat you instead of your wares.

And when the fourth child came, and you
in your nineteenth year
sealskin and roses,
a humility which reached the earth and drew in
dust and angels.
Hands as solid as the roots of trees
and soothing as cream
What soothed you then?

Dust and angels,
or hard work and a going-under as high
as a transcendent moon?
(burrowing to heaven; a borrowed heaven
lighting up your sky)
I watch from the safety of my
citizenship
and sigh.

Envy, fear and longing.
Love, too.
My eyes are grafted to your face -
as you turn
and herd your children round you
as unselfconscious as a sun
or a melon ripened by the sun
you bury yourself in their eternity.
My eyes are torn
from their sockets.

Oaxacan eyes,
they're with you still.

COPING WITH FALL

As the mountain ash berries change their
amber light to red and the Canada geese fly
overhead in a honking unison of purpose, the
air takes on a clarity through which it is
possible to see much more than winter.
Children know this, and spend their time in
exultation, giving autumn the infinity it
requires. When leaves turn and drop and lie
in heaps, children know that jumping into
them guarantees immortality, or at least they
know the sameness of people and leaves.

Ask them. They will tell you nothing.
But laugh and run into the leaves again. Then
ask the image that they leave behind.

YOU, MY FATHER

Should I use you for my own (poetic) ends?

Father, would this have stopped you?

I was no more to you than craft,
a creative leisure project.
So sharp were your tools,
so resistant the material,
so large the pieces broken off
and heavy the hand which broke them,
I think I was a sculpture made of shale.

This poem is the closest we may come to
absolution.

You were a Sunday artist of unpredictable skill,
a reluctant Pygmalion, who,
when the statue came to life,
put a magic replica of yourself inside
that moved its limbs and spoke its words
even as it spurned you.

You owe me this poem.

Why then do I want it to be fair?
Sometimes I think my memory is at fault.
I remember you raving at the dinner table,
playing gravity for a weapon,
pulling out the tablecloth,
turning our laps from succor into fire.

I remember you
waiting coiled behind the door to
punch my brother,
(thirteen, thin and scared)
because he had stayed out one whole hour
later than your decree.

I even remember you in our bitter English house
sobbing against the refrigerator
because you'd found that you
can't go home again
while we children
huddled terrified against the ancient heater

dubbed Heathcliff because it moaned
like a phantom on the moors,

and how fear turned you compassionate
after I smashed my hand through the bedroom window
in an effort to escape you.

I remember how oppressive you made compassion,
how the air around the window
heaved, then settled thicker than before.

You, father, breaking all my sister's toys
at Christmas because she had
accidentally broken one of mine,
have given me a memory as
seasonal as tinsel,

and your silence when I lay ill
thousands of miles from home
is part of my sad mythology.
I expect a lonely death.

I know there were other things.
I know that you were handsome and dashing
and charming and witty.

I have seen your photographs.
You were good behind the camera too
and could coax a blossom
out of a garden of fists.
I even know you loved me
and that you were

A blinded, flailing giant
on the run from an unfinished past
recreating yourself with the license
of a virgin in Haiti -
just as lost and, finally, sick at heart.

Your religion made you guilty
and your guilt made you angry
and your anger made you guilty
and only your God could forgive you.

I know all this, my father,
but I do not remember it.

It is not the stuff of memories.
Fairness is an interloper there.

FINDING OUT

I am lost in the forest of my body
cloaked by the stumbling trees
the vines with their wet leaves
flat against the cortex of vision,
the darkness which shapes the trees
more real than trees.
But when I climb the single peak,
triangular above the rush of streams
which threw this body
headlong into knowledge
only a body could know
I am not lost.
This is the lookout, the wayout.

And the joining with you
seemed a given then
your beauty a landscape with muscles
or maybe a valley
with a hidden spring
or even a long, dark tunnel
to fuse you to the earth's core.

The old rhythms suited us best -
the rhythms of tides and
moons we all fall into when not
splitting our nails against granite
or toeing a hold in a cliff.

Rhythms which, when stilled,
give birth to deserts
where the need is naked
the wanting whole
all of life's desires focussed in
a single act

satisfied
only with you
where, for once,
what was desired
what was irrational
was true.

I told you that I didn't love you.
What I meant was, I didn't approve.

How was I to know that's all there was,
that to come down from the windy peaks
did not mean walking in the dressed fields,
but, thrust from the downward spiral,
haunting the landscape of space?
The only forest here's my body
And I cannot find the path home.

FLYING THROUGH THE MORNING

Flying through the morning
I go towards meaning
with an open mouth
and a heart full of the
symbolism of hearts

full, too, of blood
and the reality of ventricles.

I am a companion of truth
and truth expects me
to fly back
and reveal it

as a swan lifts a wing
to reveal cygnets.

Truth is wrong.

It is itself a swan
flying through the morning
its graceful neck as strong
as the muscles and sinews
of a full-grown bull
enraged by the art of
dancers.

I do not fear for truth,
only its apologists.

And so I end this poem
flying still through the morning
as close to the sun as words will allow.

FRIENDS / CONVERSATION

Next to the wine glasses shoved at angles into the grass,
ants scramble onto giant wheels, fan out in a plateful of legs.

These are my friends seated round the table,
their husbands in the distance on the clipped
green lawn. Hands reach for sustenance, find the
bowl empty, retreat like broken promises to solitary laps.

Our children play close by us in the sun. One rests yet
inside its mother's body. In the origins of its bones
and eyes is the truth of friendship. Like a misplaced kiss,
the conversation turns to gossip and we do not answer each
other so much as embroider a patchwork quilt. In the grass,
the insects stumble close. The sun shines through our faces,
enters the pyrex coffee pot, is poured casually into pottery
prisons. We raise the comfort of heat and light to oblivious
lips.

These are my friends seated round the table,
their hollow hands hold flowers, Christmas
presents, clothes. I have been given masks,
I have been given boxes. Once I tore away
the paper to see a solid jade knife.

The women move closer. The grass seethes with the movements of
insects. Above us the sky is a huge blue space.
The seething and the emptiness go on. Between them
we cleave to each other, tongues stuck to honey
in a sweet closed mouth.

Do you see us there, seated round the table?
See our husbands, homes and children, our
cigarettes, our pasts? The table has sharp
edges, there is an absence of roses.

The laughter we are about to break into has no sense of ceremony. It waits stolidly in the air, betraying no signs of the levity it will unleash, taking no responsibility for what it can hide. Smalltalk, too, is unconcerned. As green the grass, as red the wine, the conversation knows no converser. It does not see us move apart, or one of us rise. After we walk away forever, it will carry on in the gardens of our neighbours, it will weave us blankets, or shrouds. It will wrap up silence, it will muffle cries. We have turned to stone around the table.

WATCHING THE GIRL IN THE DOORWAY

She stands artless in the doorway
blocking the sun
But the sun will not be blocked
And explodes into her

so that she becomes an icon
Her hair a halo
Her body a sacred vessel
for the giving out of light

She should stand carefully in the doorway
she should stand there forever
But she moves off, heedless,
taking the light with her.

GOD ON THE BEACH

In the beginning was the Word.
In the end were the movies.

God is wearing sunglasses
and tanning Himself on a beach in Hawaii
While I wear nails in my hands
and dodge crosses.

Oh, it's sad.
He isn't who I thought He was
my perfect lover
All kindness and gentility
All that is beautiful
All that is love

I have forgotten Him
Mea culpa, mea culpa
But His aculpa, too
for preferring autographs
to virgins
and passing his days on Waikiki beach.

Oh, my God, my God
why hast Thou forsaken me?
I still wear your crown of blood
and suffer lashes.
I even know right from wrong.

Do You? My God of the rhinestone sandals
I would be foolish to create You again
Knowing Your desire to see Your name in lights
and weakness for buttered popcorn.

But who is there to turn to
when the stench of wrong is high
and the world seems a bullet
rushing home?

HAIL ME, FULL OF GRACE

Hail me/
Full of grace/
Beneath the Bougainvillea/
Diet Pepsi in one hand/
Melon in the other.

Today I am a woman without
gods. Minor deities no longer dance among the
flowers. The elves and fairies have fled the trees
and as for the Hindu goddess who inhabited the
plastic cup, she was the first to go.

Yesterday, I had no needs. I had no money. I
had no home. Yesterday I saw the trick of power so
clearly I did not even need to turn my face against
it. I walked instead in the clear woods and scorned
complexities. I walked in the city, the buildings
full of light, I was happy.

News came that I would never have a good
relationship. Still I could pull the blinds against
the rain and walk the baby in her stroller.

Then the black crow bigger than the sun flew
over the sun, the gods fled the universe, and I am
here, unblest, defrocked, all my grace sucked out
of me, a deflated straw of a woman, my happiness up
in the clouds. Power sees its opening. We who have
denied it might as well give thanks.

THIS IS WHERE THE HEART STARTS

This is where we all belong:
In rocking chairs, holding children,
reading stories in voices other than our own.

This is where the heart starts.
Here, there is no blood
but the blood of the heart pumping.
Here there is no violence but love.

Here is where winged creatures hold us
Hyacinths flower on the walls,
their petals slide down the wallpaper,
blow off and drown us
in an excess of silk.

Here we know the truth
of planets
Feel the pull of orbits
as invitations to the dance.

Nothing should change this.
Nothing.
Not the struggle for money
Not the cruelty of corporations
Not age
Not the torture of those most dedicated
to the act of love
Not the knowledge of our state of grace.
Nothing.

HIPPIES

The hippies were my gypsies
setting my dull suburban life
to the music of flutes and dulcimers
the girls with their Botticelli hair
flowered toes
man-in-the-moon smiles
babies
round as teacups,
brimming with noises,
soft cooings
tiny hiccups
tipsy doves in a nest of arms.

They danced in the field behind us
trailing feathers like clouds
then sank into thickets
of hand-dyed cushions
softened by the warmth of bodies
beside the rivers windchimes make
when jostled by an earthy breeze.
Men and women lay entwined
bowled over
by infinite possibilities
and a sweet-smelling
smoky-toky bit of heaven
right there
behind our house

Away from a life of duty
(they knew secrets)
where no fathers raged and stamped
against the borders of their dwellings
and no faceless, blind brick buildings

walled up joy
told us who and what
we were.

The hippies were my fairies.
I still believe in them.
Though they're gone now,
it's only to a place I can't discover
Like elves and dragons
I will find them

once the age of reason's passed.

COMING HOME

My companion said it was good to be home,
where there were no machine guns in the banks,
less bribery, less fear.
He said he thought of us as peace-makers,
ambassadors,
a country full of hope.

But I thought of Quasimodo
large and lonely in his tower
deaf to the bells ringing crazily
sequestered, full of love.

Lumbering at last into the daylight,
crowned the King of Fools,
rescuing Esmerelda from the torturers,
only to lose her again.
And, when the time came,
a murderer,
who lay down his life for a kindness.

There is sanctuary in a cathedral,
but there are secrets in the walls,
and who would not fear (and fear for)
this monstrous heart of gold?
And is it ours, or a myth of ours,
a cripple's covering for a lust
so large it could devour the world
if we were whole, and proud?

HOUSE IN THE WIND

The wind says "fear me".
I do not fear it.

This is Canada.
This is Newmarket.
This is Rockway Court.

Tornado warning, says the radio.
My neighbour speaks of hiding under stairs.
I scoff.

But, finally, driven out to save a
potted blackcurrant from the rage
of an element scorned
I feel the wind like the pull of the tide,
like tendrils of deadly seaweed,
like an octopus' malevolent arms.
I am drowning in wind.

FOR KATHRYN AT 40

As we grow older, we should be smooth as pears
For we inhabit our skins fully,
claiming the traits we railed against
when we were young.

We know the territory.
We also know that much of life is pain.
A slow burning, a fire in the muscles
So that the brain, too, smoulders, Overcome.

But there are those who dance on coals,
And you're a master of their art.
So graceful,
grave and calm
We sometimes aren't aware you dance.
And all your courage goes unsung
Because it is your camouflage.

To Kathryn, at 40, as the tally sheets come in -
I'd like to read them for you:
She cares.
She does things other people only wish they'd done.
She's got more guts (and lives) than cats.
Somewhere she was sixteen
and those who meet her now
negotiate the maze of history -
yearbooks, graduations, lovers,
triumphs, friends -
But Kathryn, at 40,
holds that girl inside -
a flower in a diamond.
We see her clearly through the
gemstone strength of who you have become.

GOD GRANT ME MADNESS WHEN I'M OLD

God grant me madness when I'm old. I want to be the
bag lady at the reception, to haunt the premieres
and the comings-out in nothing but rags and old silk
flowers, drooped and flagging as the skin upon my
neck. I want to be scorned, yet there, I want to be
there, where the life is, under the sneers and
condescension, under the false barriers which create
a true excitement, let me be there, defiant till the
end, in my torn stockings all the courage of the
lost and tired - but there, there, still and always
there, as strong as diamonds in a brooch of steel,
let me be there.

DESIRE WITHOUT EYES

Women at midlife,
Take heart.
The body rumpled but erotic,
at one with the turbulent sheets.

Around your eyes, a frame
of antique silk
fragile, as if aware
the way things look is not
forever vital to desire.

And when you dream
of rods between your legs
growing buoyant, tremulous and strong
from your own sweet roots
He dreams too.
Of penises turned inward,
luxuriant and deep,
tunnels
to centres he never knew he had.

The slipping-in
then comes as soft as sleep
and subtle as a glove.

Soon you start to dream
of crossing rivers,

of meeting creatures
with mold all tangled in their hair.

They bring news of letting-go,
a falling-away of lust,
and rising up of longing
for a true eternity.

It's then you begin
to feel pregnant with
your self,
unchanged withing a changing vessel.
The birth will not be easy.
You have confused the mother with
the child.

Something will go out.
As something else lights up.
The shimmer at the edge of vision
not to be gazed upon, but glimpsed,
a question not to be answered,
but asked
over and over again
until the shimmer
becomes a sheet of gold
more blinding than the revelation
of desire without eyes -
the mystery, inscrutable, arcane -
crying triumph,
crying victory,
at the heart of the lucid world.

THE MODEL

I swing through the trees
in my leopard-look maillot
my hair a wild tangle of leonine grace
fires burn behind my eyes
for I am thinking "jungle, jungle".

Muscles flex in my thighs
the odour of leopard is a womb,
 or a tunnel
and fires burn behind my eyes.

Though I am afraid of anonymity
I am more afraid of the meaning of sorrow.
I want each savage tree
to acknowledge my animal origins.

I shake my hair. Savagely.
My fingers tremble and give birth to claws -
bright hooks to pull me into immortality.
Light-becoming-shadow
 (suddenly)
I lope into the darkness
with blood upon my teeth.

I pad under the trees at night
I drink from silvered pools
Small animals, held white and slack
 in my mouth
Whimper as I break their backs.

NAMING SONG

In a better world
I would have called you Elan

Elangonel, Indian name which
brands the world with magic

Instead I called you Adam
a more fitting name
for one who is not born to paradise

who must contend with schoolyard taunts
and tiny minds
and people who fear poetry.

Oh, Adam, man of the red earth,
no name is strong enough
to hold the birth of love.

TO THE BOY WITH THE ONYX ELEPHANT

It was Puebla. It was a Sunday night.
The bus station was like all bus stations.
Only the proximity of the vibrant tiled city
made it shout bus station as loudly
as the churches shouted gold.

You came to me and held out the onyx elephant,
small and peremptorily carved.
You asked for five pesos.
I gave them to you.
Five pesos then was a quarter at the most.

Two well-dressed Mexican teenagers
took me aside.
"You have paid too much," they said.
"They are worth no more than two.
He is a cheat."

Shit. An eight-year-old cheat with a filthy worn-out
face,
a torn American t-shirt
and sneakers tied with string?

I said, "So what?" and grinned at you.
You smiled back at me.

But then I saw your eyes.
Bewilderment was all that held you to me.
The rest of you as remote and glacial as my homeland
was just then.

What were you thinking?
Did you want to murder me in my bed?
Did you want to rob me?
Did you want to go away with me?
All of that. And yet it was
indifference, the mask behind which nothing hid
which made me peer into a bus's window
seeking my reflection.

I lost the onyx elephant.
I never lost the distances you showed me
between my Mexico and yours.

THE SECRET OF THE PEACOCK'S TAIL

Tell me the secret of the peacock's tail
the why of it
the spread of feathers a fan
with eyes
irony clouding a clarity of colours -
a hidden face behind
a staring shield -
an incandescence,
a tumult, a cornucopia of
spilled prisms

dragged in the dirt
encumbrance to be tolerated
torn and ragged at the crowning end
a frizzled halo
soft-focus frame

to the truth of beauty
dusty at the edges.

THE PHYSICAL

There are few positions
lower than
to lie down naked
under a paper sheet.

But then you touch me with those hands
which have cupped magic -
the wetness of a world-new head
scooped and treasured
into breath's first life.

My neck, and then
my breasts.
Now fingers slick with
practised grace
slip inside the confines of

My body,

I am in love
with your access to orifices.
Although
you deny their intimacy
I know
that all your kind
is
empowered by this
privilege
to probe.

Those recesses
are not fooled by
pragmatism
stoppering
the milky spill
of desire.

But this desire does not require fruition.
This moment is its own reward.

Except Death too adores such moments.
She enters, grinning, blocks the door,
spreads wide
her sequinned cloak
to flash
that greying
triangle
that old yield sign

I'd like to tell the bitch
to take a hike
I'd like to shout,
"Doctor, there must be some mistake!
I don't belong inside this hedge
of hoses.
Let's escape this bad joke together.
Let's find a better package
for our selves."

But I know too well
you'd startle back in horror.
"Nurse!" you'd cry,
"This one's flown the coop!"

So I guess we'll have to rot
with all the others.
The grand old moment's passed,
you're right, it's flown.

I was a fool.
Your hands are your arm's ends.
And I'm a dying woman,
fully grown.

POEMS FROM THE LATE
TWENTIETH CENTURY

After the war
(the one they say it is subversive to think about)
After that proprietary war
if anything survives,
and you are the one to find these poems
will they tell you anything
about our times?

How much will you want to know?

Do they say that cruelty was unresolved
And pleasure quite detached
(little pictures framed and hanging
on the bathroom wall)?
or that poetry became unpleasant
irrelevant to the majority
unbeautiful
unloved?

That men and women
sparred and crossed and
changed and grew
and called each other names
or, perhaps most foolishly,
took themselves seriously
while the planet rotted
and the arsenal grew?

Do they say that nothing changed
that nothing was held sacred
that everything was in a state of flux,
that god was with us even to the end?

But perhaps the flat syllables of despair,
so much of our times,
will prove an affectation, or a means of coping
and, fear having made us noble,
there will be no catastrophe.

Always on the brink of destruction
yet still here
An affirmation
of the unholy power of life

Then these poems
can be what they were meant to be.
Words of supplication, sacrifices, homage,
bribes, bait to snare the elusive
goodness of the human race.

TESTS

To find out why the small of her back
felt like a pestel of red-hot iron
grinding the vertebrae below it
to ash
the doctor tied a collar round her neck
and pumped it full of air.

"Does that hurt?
How much?"
"Does it hurt now?"
"And now?"

He took readings of the pressure.

When it felt as though her spine would
explode in shards of bone
and her torso fold down over it
until the pointed remnants
pierced her lungs
she asked for a towel to
shove inside her mouth
to stop the screams.

Work can be like that.
When your child is ill
When the concrete that holds your house together
is crumbling
and only you can prop it up
When you have two deadlines one day apart
and need the money both, if met, will bring
and the laundry rests in burial mounds
in stairwells, behind doors,
spilling into hallways
so that you trip in a run

for the telephone
which brings more work
and there's a meeting tomorrow
and you haven't finished your report

It's always then your head gets wild with words.
They wing off far beyond your reach
to end their finite lifespans somewhere else
uncaught
unpinned
unwritten
unexplained

You think of all the poets
who wrote twelve books under thirty.
As a pressure collar tightens round your neck,
and you sit down in the rubble
to start another kind of work
because you have to.

This is the standard test
designed especially for women
the kind of test you know
makes you a martyr before you begin.

But not to try
means yet another woman
Silenced.

WHALES ON THE SAGUENAY RIVER

The wind was strong, the waves were high.
Out on the deck,
I held my small son
tight against the spray
And felt his body shiver into mine.
I thought of when the two of us
were one and kissed his hair.

When I looked up,
the whales had come.
Whales on the Saguenay River,
shining so black and vivid
against the vast blank stretch
towards the sea,
they gave the water eyes.

I craned my neck around my son
leaned back against the rail
then ran with him to catch the nuance
a sleek giant makes when
it enters the world of dwarfs.

But the whales on the Saguenay River
were a distant flash of truth
You could hear them puffing air against
the silence
blowing holes through the everyday

I held my small one closer still
and whispered comforts in his ear
as much to comfort myself as him
While the whales on the Saguenay River
slid onwards to the sea.

WHAT LOVE IS

I don't remember love
what it feels like
what it does
how it up-ends the palm-trees,
blows a halo round the moon.
None of this I remember.

Various small hugs I remember
and distant, towering kisses
tasting themselves in the air.

I remember a face or two
and a lovely, down-dipping
feeling of surrender.
I certainly remember you.

But what of love?
I would rather bury it with a stake
through its heart
or leave it as carrion for popular songs.
I would rather have you.

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